

Los Angeles Times

From the Los Angeles Times

Assembly speaker sworn in; L.A. Democrat Karen Bass, the first black woman to hold the post, says she'll focus on the budget crisis.

By Nancy Vogel, Los Angeles Times
May 14, 2008 Wednesday

SACRAMENTO - Los Angeles Democrat Karen Bass vowed urgent action to address California's budget crisis Tuesday when she was sworn in as Assembly speaker, the first African American woman to lead a legislative body in U.S. history.

Bass struck some of the few somber notes in a joyous celebration of the occasion, telling a chamber packed with well-wishers that "we have to respond to the current economic crisis the way we would a natural disaster."

"We have to toss aside the boxes we put ourselves in and the labels we place on others and come together to get the job done," Bass said.

Chosen by her peers in February to lead the Assembly and sworn in by predecessor Fabian Nunez (D-Los Angeles), Bass takes over at a critical time: Today Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger is to release a plan to deal with a budget shortfall that he says could reach \$20 billion. His negotiations with legislative leaders over a spending plan will now begin in earnest.

Bass has said she wants a "balanced" approach to the budget that will protect the state's most vulnerable citizens. She also said she is optimistic that the dire nature of the state's fiscal problems -- the controller has warned that California could run out of cash in August -- will force legislative leaders and the governor to reach resolution quickly. A new budget is supposed to be in place July 1, the start of the next fiscal year.

"We can't sit here and wait for the World Series," she said shortly after the swearing-in ceremony. "And I don't think we will."

Family, friends and fellow politicians from near and far packed the mint-green Assembly chamber. As Rep. Diane Watson (D-Los Angeles) reminded the crowd that Bass is the first African American woman to ascend so high in U.S. legislative politics, Bass, seated with elbows propped on a desk, momentarily shook her head against her clasped hands, as if in disbelief.

Schwarzenegger praised Bass as an "extraordinary person," and said she earned her post as one of the most powerful politicians in California "the old-fashioned way -- she worked."

He also touched upon the tragedy Bass endured two years ago, when her 23-year-old daughter and son-in-law were killed in a Los Angeles car crash. Bass had recently said that she would give up her political career to spend one more day with her daughter.

"That says everything about you," Schwarzenegger said.

Bass held no elected office before winning an Assembly seat in 2004 to represent a district that includes West Los Angeles, Culver City and Baldwin Hills. A physician assistant raised by a homemaker and mail carrier in the Venice-Fairfax area, Bass

sought in the early 1990s to find solutions to drug addiction, gun violence and other social ills she witnessed treating emergency room patients.

The Community Coalition, a nonprofit group she founded, helped limit the number of liquor stores that reopened in South Los Angeles after the 1992 riots. The group also helped bring more laundromats and grocery stores to the area. It also worked to close low-rent motels and replace cigarette and alcohol billboards near schools.

In the Legislature, Bass is best known as a fierce advocate for the state's roughly 80,000 foster children.

Nunez, who will be forced from office by term limits in December, served four years and three months at the Assembly helm. Bass' term ends in December 2010.

Nunez helped Bass consolidate enough votes among Assembly Democrats to replace him, but he told her Tuesday, "You won the respect of every member of this house."

Bass said recently that her focus would be necessarily narrow: Balance the budget, find a way to close a tax loophole so that \$300 million to \$500 million a year can be earmarked for foster children and help colleagues accomplish their legislative goals.

Her immediate goal, she said, is to chart long-term tax policy changes to stabilize California's fluctuating revenue. She said Tuesday that she has asked former Govs. Gray Davis, a Democrat, and Pete Wilson, a Republican, to help choose a panel of experts to make recommendations.

"I am not a tax person, so I don't pretend to have a specific solution," said Bass in an interview last week. "What I'm good at is getting people to come together in a room that are the experts.

"My tenure is going to be short," Bass said. "I may or may not be able to accomplish it, but I sure would like to get it started so, come the end of the year or beginning of next year, there would be some concrete proposals we could take into the next budget cycle."

Bass, 54, is the second woman to lead the Assembly, after Orange County Republican Doris Allen, who held the post for three months in 1995.

Her swearing-in ceremony featured five former speakers: Robert T. Monagan, Willie L. Brown Jr., Cruz Bustamante, Los Angeles Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa and Los Angeles City Councilman Herb J. Wesson Jr.

Actress Alfre Woodard read a poem called "Ego Tripping" by Nikki Giovanni, and Assembly Republican Leader Mike Villines of Clovis told Bass, who wore a vermilion outfit: "I know it's a new day when I saw that red power suit come out."

Also in attendance were Maria Elena Durazo, executive secretary-treasurer of the Los Angeles County Federation of Labor; L.A. City Controller Laura Chick, L.A. City Atty. Rocky Delgadillo and Oakland Mayor Ron Dellums.

Besides negotiating major policy issues, Bass' job will involve raising campaign funds to ensure that Democrats maintain their 48-person majority in the 80-member house in the November election.

The California Democratic Party sought to cash in on the celebration with a fundraiser Monday evening at a restaurant near the Capitol. For \$50,000, attendees received 10 tickets to the reception and five tickets to lunch with Bass on Tuesday.

Karen Bass

Name: Karen Bass

Political party: Democrat

Born: Oct. 3, 1953, in Los Angeles

Residence: Baldwin Vista

Personal: Divorced from Jesus Lechuga. Only child, Emilia, was killed in 2006 in a car crash at age 23

Education: Bachelor's degree, Cal State Dominguez Hills. Physician assistant certificate, USC School of Medicine

Career highlights: Teacher in USC physician assistant program; founder of Community Coalition, a nonprofit grass-roots group; elected to Assembly in 2004 and named majority leader in 2006

Quote: "California is a giant in crisis -- and it's up to us to solve that crisis."

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